

Venice Biennale 2005 essay series

Uncanny Tales from In-between: some recent Australian art

Richard Grayson

Increasingly the world is becoming Australian.

At one time as an Australian artist you were very sensitive to the fact that the debates that mattered lay elsewhere: maybe the School of Paris or perhaps the arcane investigations about the flatness of the picture plane coming out of NYC. With the growth of post-modernism in the late seventies and early eighties however, artists everywhere discovered that they had been on the receiving end of grand narratives and constructed ideologies. Australia had just been there a little bit longer.

Suddenly the tense in which production took place shifted -- the fact that Australian culture had been shaped and informed by received images and ideas ceased to be symptomatic of a delay and a distance from the 'centre', but served instead to place it in the 'now', right at the centre of the contemporary condition. The work and the magazines produced at the time still possess the electric charge of this liberation.

The very conditions of culture in Australia were now able to be articulated with confidence and specificity, and it became clear that the Australian experience lead to a specific lived understanding of complex ideas of identity, diversity, nation, post-coloniality and even technology.

Multiple registers and ghostly presences are central to Australian contemporary culture. The everyday experience of petrol stations, city streets, television and shopping malls is underwritten by, and exists in tandem with, an awareness of the cultures of Aboriginal Australia - either expressed or occluded. This make the mainstream Western culture feel to a degree contingent and constructed, a willed or hallucinatory narrative rather than an environmental given. Nowhere is this effect stronger than in the arts. After all it is in this field (as understood by the West) that the great and complex achievements of Aboriginal cultures are enacted. And these achievements cannot be located as being in the past -- a lost, golden age -- Aboriginal painting as we understand it did not exist in its present form before the seventies, slightly later than minimalism.

This shapes contemporary art in many different ways: most obviously through work that is directly informed by the experiences of Aboriginality. Tracey Moffatt, arguably Australia's highest profile living artist, uses the spaces and discontinuities between the cultures as the location from where she makes her work: stories or experiences initially located in Aboriginal Australia are restaged using the languages and codes of contemporary cinema and art. But she pushes these 'normal'

codings of representation of otherness into new configurations so they are able to accommodate the complex realities of difference in Western culture and her own expressions as an individual.

Other artists are less directly engaged with the syntaxes of high culture but seek instead a more demotic expression, as with Destiny Deacon, where her wardrobe and her living room and her everyday life as well as her photographs and her texts are shifted into the art gallery to articulate her experience as an urban Aboriginal woman in a culture that feels free to marginalise (or exoticise) her experiences, but which at the same time is full of second hand representations of the living cultures that form her inheritance.

Aboriginal Australia is only part of the discourse that shapes today's complex society and its 'sense of itself' but their presence and their ghosts make practitioners aware of the fragility and contingency of the cultural matrix that they are part of...that it cannot be the whole story. Their example almost requires artists to find new tales and new ways to express the experiences and histories of today.

Robert Macpherson has developed a practice, initially extrapolated from Greenbergian dictates on painting, that articulates words, materials and signs drawn from the landscapes of the suburbs and country. He takes as his raw material signage made by people who would not consider themselves to be 'artists' - signs for fruits, vegetables, and garden materials - and he turns them into a landscape of text and image. His work also draws on the languages and tales of the post diggers and the stockmen -Aboriginal and Anglo. These specifically Australian references - slang words for methylated spirits for instance, painted onto rough salvation Army Blankets, or the Latin names of frog species found at outback waterholes - are used to make work that operates between arte-povera and concrete poetry and which is deeply democratic, aesthetically rigorous and compellingly beautiful.

Derek Kreckler's unsettling photo series, *White Goods* (2003/4) documents a world where the crimes of colonisation have become conflated with the desires of suburban Australia; where groups of people stare in fascination at fridge freezers and washing machines hung by ropes, dangling from the understruts of bridges in some strange lynching. In another work *Blind Ned* (1998) we watch the icon of outlaw Australia as he staggers sightlessly and tentatively through the Australian bush.

T.V. Moore's video works express the historical and cultural fascination that outsider and outlaw archetypes exercise on the national psyche. This voice is part Bukowski and part Swag Man - and is expressed in works such as *Urban Army Man* (2000) which follows the progress of one of the street people in his neighbourhood as he make his regular passage down Oxford Street, one of the

main funky night-time drags of Sydney, or in his recent multi screen fantasia on (again) Ned Kelly, *The Neddy Project* (2001-2004).

The cultures that the West calls 'Asia' have long been a shifting and often unsettling presence in the Australian imagination. Much recent practice explores ways that this might now be articulated or understood in the twenty-first century. The videos of Emil Goh explore the architectural and social spaces that have become hybrid and shared across cultures -- the rotating Lazy-Susan at the centre of a table of friends in a Chinese restaurant, or the eerie spaces of the shopping malls that snake through Brisbane and Sydney as well as Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong. Sometimes the works take on a psycho-sexual edge as when the camera jitters and ducks through a busy mall to follow anyone wearing red clothing, a crazed game of tag in a suburban echo of the lost child in Roeg's *Don't Look Now*. Other times the progress is more gentle, as in one of my favourite pieces where the camera follows the progress of a man up an escalator in a shopping centre, ascending serenely to a heaven that is surely full of retail opportunities.

Kate Beynon uses Chinese text and graphics to explore the distances between the experiences of China and Australia, generating a new world and mythology from in-between -- an analogue of her own experience and background. In this represented universe, part sci-fi and part mythic, feisty heroines strike martial poses in the clear lines of comic art whilst embarking on some mysterious quest, battling against forces that we can only guess at - especially if, like the artist, we have little or no knowledge of the Mandarin script in which much of the information is expressed. There is embodied in this the slight glancing off, the push and pull, the contradictions, which help constitute the fluid identities generated at the crossings and blurrings of cultures.

There's also a science fiction edge in the work of Simryn Gill. *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century* (2000) is a series of photographs taken of people moving through their normal environment: the street, the living room, the beach, but instead of heads they have sprouting from their shoulders rich growths of fruit or vegetables. These hybrid entities that bring to mind the strange amalgams of human and animal described in the early travel guides of John Mandeville in the 16th century as well as present day Hollywood productions set on distant star systems. Gill herself comes from the Malaysian town she depicts and the work becomes a meditation on what constitutes the 'native' as expressed in terms of botany as well as in ideas of nation and the definitions of home and habitat. More recently her work has explored absences: empty rooms in *Dalam* (2002), or abandoned modern developments in *Standing Still* (2004) that are being reclaimed by the Malay rainforest. Here, the fleeting human presences are off-stage, only their works remain, slipping from one state to another - from being to non-being, from the cultural to the natural - and are made fluid, fugitive and ghostly.

The hallucinations of modernism also provide material for James Angus. Using computer technologies he makes concrete the platonic ideals of architecture and design, but forces them into different registers and mis-translations. An Italian modernist fascist monument is twisted into an endless architectural mobius strip, the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* (2002) or the sinister forms of a deep sea ray are re-articulated and engineered using the modelling hardware for producing aerodynamic forms. *Manta Ray* (2002). These miscegenations and translations seem to send the world into flux, where things can flicker between forms and states, and have been made fluid by the power of the digital.

Angus uses the computer as a site that can destabilise fixed identities and certainties, and similar approaches hold fascination for many other artists. Australia had its experience of the world fundamentally and rapidly changed by the Internet. Even before the effect was actual, the potentials were exciting to artists. The Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) was set up as a project by the EAF in Adelaide in the early eighties to explore possibilities that were at the time almost entirely hypothetical. Until recently, New Media work was supported by its own dedicated board in the Government Arts Funding organisation. Now technology's debates, expressions and influences have permeated diverse cultural practices: from gallery-based sculptures of engineered rays or the paintings of geometrical abstractions in contested space by Stephen Bram. They include the early techno-feminist fantasies of the VNS Matrix and the current net-based explorations of Melinda Rackham. David Haines and Joyce Hinterding, both individually and in collaboration, make work that investigates the possibilities of representing of the previously ineffable or invisible that technology affords. They make fantastic digital landscapes showing worlds without gravity (the Levitation Grounds 2000) and make installations that manifest electrical activity high in the earth's atmosphere (Airtime 2002). Although driven by developments associated with the Enlightenment and Modernity, their use of technology transforms it into a place where older or hidden narratives can manifest themselves, or be revealed, in parallel with those of today. The work becomes an unfolding of uncanny tales from the spaces in-between.

Richard Grayson is an artist and curator. He was a founding member of the Basement Group in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, director of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide between 1991-1998 and artistic director of the 2002 Biennale of Sydney, *(The World May Be) Fantastic*. He exhibited recently at Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin and Yuill/Crowley Gallery in Sydney and is AHRB Research Fellow at Newcastle University.

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